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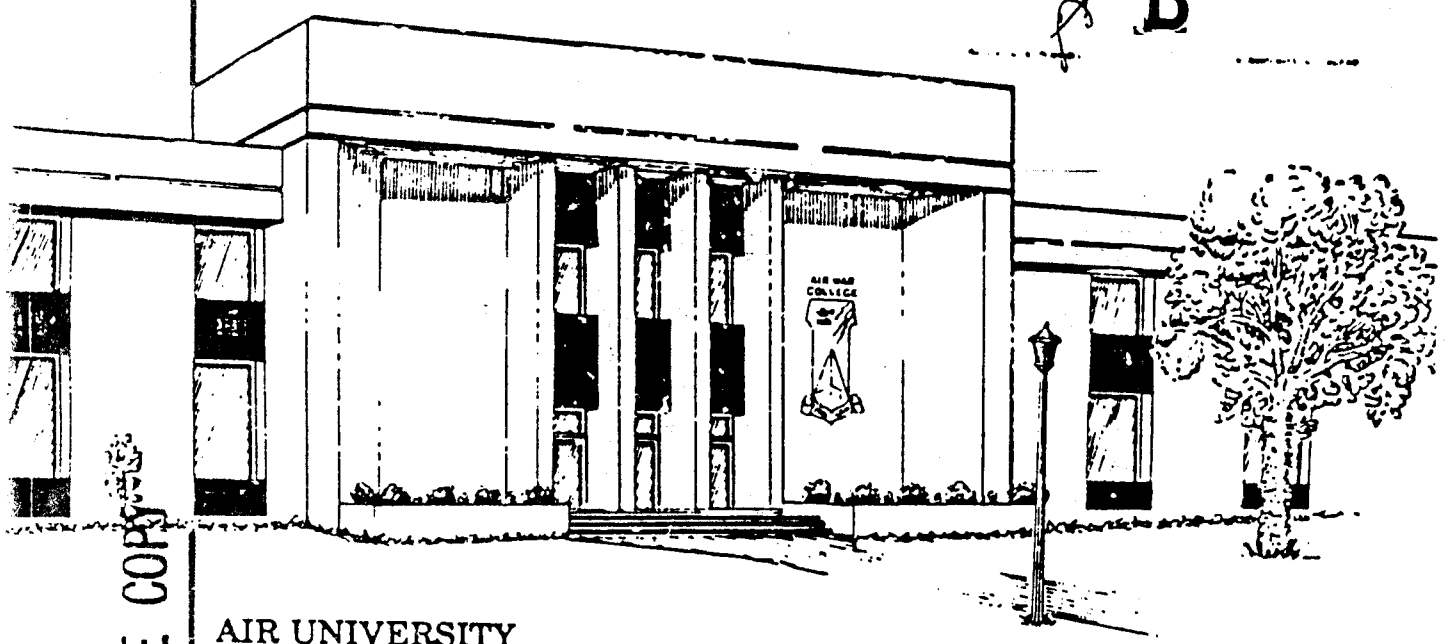
MEDIA DOCTRINE: THE MISSING ELEMENT

By LT COL CECIL ROSS



AIR UNIVERSITY
UNITED STATES AIR FORCE
MAXWELL AIR FORCE BASE, ALABAMA

Air War College

Air University

MEDIA DOCTRINE: THE MISSING ELEMENT

by

Cecil Ross

Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

A RESEARCH REPORT SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY

IN

FULFILLMENT OF THE RESEARCH

REQUIREMENT

Research Advisor: Lieutenant Colonel Donald E. Morrissey

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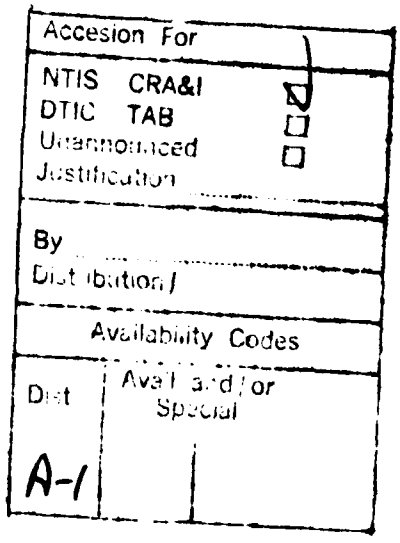

AIR WAR COLLEGE RESEARCH ABSTRACT

TITLE: MEDIA DOCTRINE: THE MISSING ELEMENT

AUTHOR: Cecil Ross, Lieutenant Colonel, USAF

The failure to include media relationships in basic U.S. military doctrine is seen as symptomatic of the greater failing of our military to effectively deal with the news media in both war and peacetime. Prescribes a more aggressive and enlightened approach by senior military officers, and more extensive media relations training for future leaders.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Lieutenant Colonel Cecil F. Ross (B.S. Journalism Cal Poly University, M.A. Personnel Management, Central Michigan University) is Deputy Director of Public Affairs, Military Airlift Command. He has 18 years public affairs experience at wing, center, and MAJCOM level, including a tour at Andrews AFB, MD working with the White House and DOD press corps. He is a graduate of Squadron Officers School, Air Command and Staff College, and the Air War College, Class of 1986.

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> . . . If we keep in mind that war springs from some political purpose, it is natural that the prime cause of its existence will remain the supreme consideration in conducting it . . .[1]
>
> Carl Von Clausewitz, On War

Clausewitz, in his treatise On War, repeats the above theme throughout his work. Although written a century and a half ago, his observation seems as relevant today as then. The rising federal deficit threatens U.S. military spending while the memory of Vietnam inhibits military options in Central America and elsewhere. Clausewitz's contention that the military and politics are inseparable has the clear ring of truth.

That view is also reflected in the Basic Aerospace Doctrine of the United States Air Force, Air Force Manual 1-1, Principles of War, paragraph 2-6:

> . . . War is a means to achieving a political objective and must never be considered apart from the political end. Consequently, political imperatives shape and define military objectives. . . .[2]

Oddly, however, AFM 1-1 fails to address the issue of relationships with the mass news media, a vital if not pivotal factor in the political conduct of war waged by a democracy.

In a country of some 240 million people, the primary means of conveying national security issues to the public must fall to the media. The ability to sustain the confidence of the American people in military operations, for better or worse, relies on this body of journalists.

Barry Zorthian, Chief of U.S. Press Relations in Vietnam from 1964 to 1968 and a believer in the need for basic media doctrine, relates that doctrine must be based in part on certain principles including an:

> . . . understanding that the media provide an opportunity for informing the public. That's the ultimate target, not the media themselves. And why is that? Because in our form of society an informed public presumably makes more intelligent decisions. Without that public support, without public knowledge, a government cannot carry out policies for long. . . .[3]

Those who hold a different view cite relatively unrestricted media access in Vietnam which brought greater coverage than in any war in U.S. history, yet American support that was deeply divided. They also claim the media's coverage painted a heavily negative view of the U.S. role. Others argue Vietnam was a war which lacked clear objectives, was sometimes poorly executed and was waged too long for popular support. Whatever view one takes, and there are many variations, it seems while media coverage cannot guarantee support of the homefront, an alienated press greatly reduces the prospects for success.

The absence of media discussion in AFM 1-1, is, a major flaw in the military mind set and symptomatic of our failure in general to come to grips with an issue of vital interest to us--how to effectively deal with the news media in a highly political society.

I would propose a modest first step to rectify the situation: include the following or similar statement in AFM 1-1 and in other services' doctrines.

> Foremost in the realm of political consideration is support of the homefront. The war's objectives, its operations and the consequences of failure to meet objectives must be clearly communicated to the citizenry to obtain and maintain support. The news media is a major means of such communication. Cooperation with the media within established ground rules could well prove crucial to successful military operations.

Why is inclusion of media relationships in basic doctrine so important? Because only by acknowledging the influence of the news media in conducting war, can we be prepared to deal with it. It is a major factor that simply cannot be ignored, anymore than terrain or weather. Until the Grenada invasion raised the issue of accommodating the media, public affairs guidance on media coverage was not mandatory for contingency plans.[4]

Media Doctrine in Peacetime

Inclusion of media relationships in basic war doctrine is only the beginning of what is needed. Media

doctrine must extend into peacetime. By far, the more frequent battles the military wages are not on the battlefield, but rather in congressional budget hearing rooms and on the TV, radio, and newspapers in the homes of tax payers. Everyday the battle rages. Defense critics attack such lucrative targets as the 600-ship Navy, the Peacekeeper Missile, the Army's Bradley fighting vehicle and the military retirement system. While a soaring federal deficit squeezes available funds for military equipment, parts and people, critics jump with glee over stories of $600 toilet seats, $700 coffee pots, and $500 wrenches.

Critics, be they political action groups, disgruntled military contractors or elected officials are skilled in using the news media to carry their criticisms. Many understand why television needs visuals, the importance of meeting deadlines, the use of "slow news days," strategic timing of press conferences and the use of drama. For example, they know that a more constrained bureaucracy cannot respond as fast to a media query late in the day so they often time their releases for then. Critics who use these techniques, are likely to obtain one-sided news accounts in their favor. The government's response the next day is often played down by national events of the new day. Experienced critics also articulate their main points into

10, 15, and 30 second "short bursts," perfect for news editors who need to condense the essence of the story.

The Apolitical Road Block

Why, if defense critics are so adept at using the news media to advantage, cannot the military respond in kind? Part of the answer has to do with the traditional apolitical nature of the military. There has been a tendency for military officers to abdicate a major portion of political activity to the civilian leadership.

Occasionally high public profiles have occurred. Military men such as General Billy Mitchell who publicly promoted air power are well remembered. General Hap Arnold, who as a major, was Chief of Public Information for the fledging Air Service in the early 1920s, is another. He used the media to herald Mitchell's call for airpower with innovative skill.[5] Similarly, General Curtis LeMay's use of the media made Strategic Air Command well known to Americans in the 1950's and 60's.[6] They are the exceptions rather than the rule, however. The price, if one is not careful, can be high. In Mitchell's case, a high and continued public profile sent him to obscurity in San Antonio, and later a court martial when he openly criticized military superiors.[7] Arnold, by association with and assistance to

Mitchell, was exiled to Fort Rily, Kansas and for a time thought his career was finished.[8]

The Vietnam Legacy

Another reason a more aggressive media relations posture has not been taken is because the military generally views the media arena as both largely outside its influence and hostile. A 1984 Gallup Poll of 257 generals and admirals conducted for Newsweek, found 59 percent had an unfavorable opinion of the news media compared to 32 percent with a favorable view and 9 percent undecided.[9]

This comes as little surprise to those associated with senior service schools. The animosity toward the media is evident. Both those at the very senior levels and those soon to be, are products of the Vietnam era. One retired general, in an address to a senior service school, went so far as to say the war was lost because of the media.

Those attitudes prevailed in the 1983 Grenada Campaign when the media was excluded from the initial action. The reason cited was security. But the exclusion symbolized to many in uniform and in the media, that the military had served notice: no more unrestrained coverage of future operations as occurred in Vietnam.

The Grenada experience brought about a new military-media dialogue with the appointment of the Joint

Chief of Staff's Media-Military Relations Panel headed by retired Major General Winant Sidle (USA-Ret). A recommendation of that panel to establish a press pool for such operations was adopted. After one false start, it has successfully been dispatched several times on exercises without breaching security. Yet, the broader and deeper issues remain.

However, flawed media coverage of Vietnam was, to claim the media is the enemy, is woefully wrong. The media, like terrain, weather or Clausewitz's "fog of war" is simply a factor of the battlefield. If we understand it and learn to deal with its complexities, idiosyncrasies and its inherent fallibilities we are far more likely to succeed. To ignore the media is to concede vital territory to our enemies and detractors.

Taking the Offensive

Having accepted the need for a change in doctrine, what then are we to do? We might begin by taking the offensive. By that, I mean putting our senior leadership into the public arena more frequently. For example, despite a four-year Air Force public affairs initiative to place our senior officers in front of more "non-choir" audiences the percentage of speeches to these groups actually declined![9] In fairness to these senior officials, their time is in

great demand. Nonetheless, it can be argued that one of the major obligations of these public figures is to be available to civilian groups and the media to discuss vital military issues.

But, more importantly, media doctrine must permeate the lower layers of the military rank structure as well. All military officers and NCOs should have an understanding of the unique relationship the media plays in our society and know how to operate in the media environment.

Prescription for Recovery

That process is now beginning with the senior service schools. Media relations curricula have been directed by former JCS Chairman, General Vessey and by the service chiefs. At the Air War College, for example, a core elective includes not only the historical and philosophical education in media relations, but also a TV laboratory which prepares future leaders for interview situations by offering them critiques and self-evaluation through video recordings. This is an adaptation of a more extensive course given Air Force general officers by the Air Force Office of Public Affairs. Other major commands have followed suit with similar courses for wing and base commanders. Still the effort is modest in comparison to the need.

There is no formalized program for the vast numbers of other military people likely to be suddenly thrust in front of camera lights to explain topics from aircraft accidents to toxic fuel spills. The first time in front of a camera is not the time to learn coping skills. While Public Affairs Officers and NCOs are generally very skilled and knowledgeable in these situations, it is more important that commanders and military experts in various fields be trained. They are naturally viewed by the media as more credible and preferred interview subjects. This training could be conducted at post or base-level using prerecorded video teaching aids produced by the DoD.

Attitudinal Imperatives

All the training in techniques, however, cannot overcome negative attitudes toward the media. For surely a defensive, antagonistic approach to the media will result in a self-fulfilling prophesy. This presents the greatest challenge of all.

Expectations must be realistic. While the military should expect balance, fairness, accuracy and reason, the media's role is not to be the military's cheerleader, as the Director of Air Force Public Affairs, Brigadier General Michael McRaney has said.[10] One should not expect a 45-second TV news story to capture all the points made in a

20-minute interview. Stories, when condensed to space or time limits, will likely never be as complete nor precise as one would wish. The final assessment should be: was it generally balanced, essentially, if not totally, accurate? When a significant error is made, the reporter should know about it. Yet, the manner in which it is made known is vital. The focus should be on the error, not on the integrity of the reporter or his profession in general. Conversely, when a story is on target, the reporter should know that to. That, in my experience, happens too infrequently.

Poor military-media relations experiences of the past have blinded many in uniform to the positive aspects of media influence. For example, during a seminar at Air War College, my colleagues could not recall a single positive news story on the military, yet they had ample examples of the military "being burned." Only grudgingly they admitted seeing stories in major news magazine in 1979 on military pilot and technican retention problems. Even then they would concede no credit to those stories increasing defense expenditures in the 1980s. Only reluctantly, they remembered the positive segment CBS's 60-Minutes produced on the Thunderbirds aerial demonstration team and Harry

Reasoner's tribute to them after the tragic crash that killed four Thunderbird pilots.

Sociologists call this phenomenon "cognitive dissonance." Oversimplified, it has to do with the difficulty of the mind to hold divergent concepts about people or things. We tend to discard those facts that do not fit our concepts of reality. It makes for a clean house but it often results in blindness to opportunities. Changing attitudes is extremely difficult. The hope rests in those whose opinions have yet to be formed.

Military-media relations are never, even under the best conditions, going to be cozy. Yet relations must be based on mutual respect, a degree of understanding for each other's differing viewpoints and responsibilities, and void of bitter antagonism. This is not the sole job of the Public Affairs Officer. The commander at all levels and his staff share this responsibility.

Nurturing the Media Relationship

One of the biggest challenges at unit level is the education of the military beat reporter whose journalistic experience is only slightly greater than his very limited knowledge of the military. As Colonel David Shea, a veteran

Air Force Public Affairs officer who has served as Director of Public Affairs for the Air Training Command, United States Air Forces in Europe and Air Force Systems Command says:

> . . . would you believe that when I was in San Antonio, which proudly calls itself "Military City, U.S.A.," with good reason, no military specialists were employed by any of the city's newspapers or radio or TV stations. I'm afraid that's the rule rather than the exception around the country . . .[11]

The mobile journalistic world means constant training of new beat reporters in the very basics of military life. No matter how repetitive and frustrating, patience and willingness to cooperate are a must.

It is all the more reason why military spokesmen must learn to avoid jargon, acronyms, and overly detailed explanations. They also must learn to encapsulate key points in short, clear terms and repeat them frequently. Spokesmen must ask themselves: will my statement make sense to the person who has only a limited knowledge (the reader, listener or viewer) on the subject? Have I boiled the issue down to the bottom line? If not, the journalist will, and probably not to my liking.

The military spokesman must also know the differing needs of radio, TV, and newspapers. For example, TV needs supporting video footage for its stories, whereas newspapers need more indepth information.

One item these three media have in common are deadlines. If the military is to make today's deadline so as to counter a claim by critics, it must recognize the value of striking while the iron is hot. A thoroughly staffed answer becomes meaningless the next day when the issue is no longer news. And when a bad story is bound to make news, it is often better to be the source of announcement than to have it come from another source, greatly distorted or exaggerated.

These are a few examples of the basic doctrinal principles of media relations which must be imparted to the future leaders of our services.

Summary

In summary, we need to put media relations in doctrine to force us to think of the implication the media has on military operations in peace and war. Our senior officers need to avail themselves more to the non-choir audiences and to the media. Lastly, we need to increase the education of military people so they can deal in the heretofore alien media environment.

If as Clausewitz's maintains, political imperatives drive the military objectives, we can ill afford to neglect the major conduit of political discourse--the mass media.

Nor can we military professionals, in assessing the lessons of past military-media relations, view the media like Mark Twain's cat, which, having once sat on a hot stove, would never sit on a cold one again.

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